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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**The Narrative of Irony and The Irony of Narrative:
Time in Milan Kundera's Novels**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of

English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Ramy Amin

Under the supervision of

Dr. William Melaney

May 2018

The American University in Cairo

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To Nietzsche and Kundera

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to give a fresh account of the study of irony by investigating the role of time in the reading process. The study follows the idea of temporal displacement within the text to understand and profile the patterns of irony, and provides a formal reading of Milan Kundera's major novels. In this thesis, a systematic method of tracing the movement of irony to arrive at the structure of the text is taken up in terms of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *Immortality*. The thesis showcases three major types of irony in a manner that casts light on the particularities of three different texts. By focusing on the most important literary device used in Kundera's literary fiction, I demonstrate the function of situational, motif and thematic irony, whenever one or any combination of these ironic modes seems appropriate to the reading of the text at hand.

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Chapter I. A Theory of Irony: The Role of Time

Kundera is known to be one of the most ironic writers of the past century. To gain a sense of how ironic he can be, we might consider Vicki Adam's remark on how a specific moment in Kundera's novel, *The Joke* becomes "a rare instance, among all of Kundera's novels, where the author describes a freedom from irony, where the author feels no irony" (143). Kundera himself declares that "the novelist's relation to his characters is . . . ironic" (*Testaments* 202). In another situation, he declares that "irony is the perspective of the novel" (qtd. in Woods 92). Thus, he gives us the literary device that most fascinates and concerns him. We, in turn, follow his insight and take up irony as the literary device we look for in the text. Nevertheless, the question remains: Why do we need irony? More importantly: How do we use it to read through the text?

Kundera refers to a literary event that was intended to be read ironically but that was interpreted twice, by a novelist and a reviewer, as serious and thoughtful. He declares that "[t]he misapprehension is understandable: I hadn't set out to *ridicule* Banaka and his professor friend" (*Testaments* 202). Later, he maintains that "[i]rony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events. Only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the *ironic connections* inside a novel, without which the novel remains uncomprehended" (*Testaments* 203). Thus, despite admitting to his failure to give the reader further clues *later on* to read the event ironically, he maintains that a *second reading* "can bring out the ironic connection inside a novel." What this implies is that the clues for reading the event as ironic were not set *after* the event itself, where the reader would expect it to be a type of situational irony, but were introduced *before* the event takes place. And since Kundera understands that readers tend to read fast and expect the novel to progress chronologically, he

prescribes a second slow reading as the way to see the ironic connection between the events and its clues. We will be dealing with this specific example further in an analysis of Kundera's novel, *The Book*; however, for our current purposes, we will proceed by explaining further what this second reading means.

A second reading means that the *ironic moment* derives its *point of focus* from a point in time located in the past which is relative to the present of the event. This means that without *temporal regression*, the reader will not be able to understand the *ironic revelation* loaded onto the present event. However, the reader is forced to consider the *point of focus* as being a *thing in time*¹, i.e., an event that cannot be absorbed into his temporality but rather controls its experience. This means that the temporal regression forced by the *ironic moment* takes place outside of the reader's temporal experience. Like every other event, this event needs the reader's *temporal experience* in order to be deciphered, but since it has its own objective temporality, *the ironic moment forces the reader outside of his temporality and throws him into experiencing time as an objective happening and not as a rendered concept*.

This operation should neither be confused with what Morson terms "foreshadowing", which he identifies as indicating "backward causality. A spatial metaphor for a temporal phenomenon, [. . .] a shadow cast in advance of an object" (48), nor should it be understood as what Gadamer termed as the *horizon*; "that which includes and embraces everything that is visible from one point" (qtd. in Iser 97). While foreshadowing is used in novels to "call our attention to the already written nature of narrative time" (49), and while the horizon allows the reader to apply a certain view of reality to the text as a narrative that forms an "interlinear version" (Stanzel 78), the moment

¹ In his book *The Structure of Time*, Newton-Smith defines *things in time* as "all types of item that are both in time and involve change. Thus, among the things in time are events, changes, processes, occurrences, happenings, incidents" (5).

of ironic revelation disrupts the harmony of a predestined future and forces the reader to see things in time and not things in temporality.

Due to this resistance of irony to be absorbed into the temporal experience of the reader, the reader's experience of time differs from a traditional non-ironic narrative. In the latter, the reader experiences what we will term *time-narrative-experience*. This means that he experiences no friction between *time-narrative* (the succession of events on an objective timeline) and *time-experience* (the reader's arrangement of events into his *temporal experience*). However, once irony is introduced, friction occurs. Instead of a simple rearrangement of events to fit with his reading experience, the reader needs to first locate the *point of focus* and then reinterpret the narrative based on that temporal regression. This friction in the way a reader experiences time in a narrative means that *time-narrative-experience* is now separated into two different timelines, *time-narrative* and *time-experience*, running at different speeds and towards different directionalities.

Experiencing two distinct types of time in an ironic narrative means that there is a reader for whom time has a beginning and an end and, more importantly, *density*. Newton-Smith describes density as a concept which “asserts that between any two distinct instants there is a third distinct instant” (52). In his argument, this means that “there will only be a[n] [. . .] infinite set of temporal instants and spatial points” (124). But in narratological terms, when the temporality of the reader tries to absorb the *thing in time* into its orbit, the reader moves from t_1 to t_2 , while a synthetic operation attempts to conciliate every t_{1-n} with every t_{2+n} ². The difference between traditional and ironic narratives would be that in the first, the narrative does not use time density since it treats time as unified timeline

² t = temporal item (defined by Newton-Smith as “instants, moments, durations” (3) etc.) and t_{1-n} is any moment preceding t_1 “where n ranges over the integers” (31)

of temporal experience, while the second utilizes time density and exploits the reader's ability to carry on more than one event over the same instant while the narrative progresses. This density is the result of the reader facing what is heterogeneous to the synthesizing of the faculty of recognition. In narratological techniques, this is the effect of introducing irony. In using irony, we feel time as a factor and not a background concept since this progressive synthesis is challenged.

This means that if between t_1 and t_2 no disruption occurs, the mind will see t_1 and t_2 as part of the same homogeneous progressive linear temporal field. And even if they have been rearranged, the mind will forcibly arrange them according to his "interlinear version." However, if a factor of disruption is introduced, En^3 , the mind will separate t_1 and t_2 as stand-alone temporal items while searching for another temporal item, a *point of focus*, that justifies the extension of *time-narrative* between t_1 and t_2 ; thus, creating the parallel *time-experience*. The degree of intensity that this process of halting the homogeneous progression of time possesses depends on two factors: first, the location of the *point of focus* with reference to the *moment of ironic revelation* (*Time Directionality*), and second, the duration between the two moments (*Time Span*).

Consider dramatic irony under the subcategory "Pathetic Agent", which Lucariello introduces in her study, "Situational Irony: A Concept of Events Gone Awry" (133). The example, "Examiner has already failed the student, whom he overhears expressing a confident hope of passing", can be read in terms of either a long or short span of time and with a point of focus (when we are told that the teacher has failed the student) that could either precede the moment of irony or occurs after it (when the student expresses a confident hope of passing). Figure 1 illustrates this example with a point of focus which precedes the moment of irony:

³ E= "event type" (31)

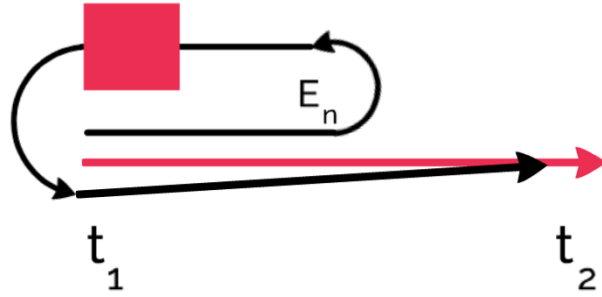


Figure 1: A Representation of Irony in Time

Where *time-narrative* is represented by the red arrow moving forward, *time-experience* is represented by the black arrow hovering over and under the red one. The black arrow, hovering over the red one at a steady distance is interrupted by E_n , (when we are told the student has failed), which is the moment of ironic revelation. The result is a *temporal regression* that covers a certain range of the elapsed time until it reaches the *point of focus* (when the student expressed a confident hope of passing) and falls back under the arrow of time to continue progressing with the normal flow of *time-narrative*⁴. The red box represents the *point of focus* where the reader realizes that E_n , *the moment of ironic revelation* should be displaced, allowing him to maintain the “stereotyped nature of reality” and to consolidate the progressive order of time within temporal experience. However, he is forced to reexamine and reinterpret the temporal distance between E_n and t_1 and then between t_1 and t_2 while maintaining their locations in time.

⁴ This is not to say that the two timelines collapse back into one in a crude manner which renders the operation obsolete, but rather that the reading experience continues to progress forward despite the disjunction between the two timelines. The figure should be taken not as a literal expression of the phenomenon, but rather an expression of its functionality.

The temporal experience which best describes the introduction of an ironic moment is anxiety in the face of the future. This anxiety is an acknowledgment that the person's/reader's horizon of expectations is not as reliable as he/she had thought it to be. This forces the reader to turn outwards and to look for clues to resituate his anticipation of the future upon a valid temporal field. Irony thus capitalizes on the performativity of *time-experience* over *time-narrative* by using what Benjamin calls "the shock element" to definitively draw the reader's attention to the displacement of temporal ground taking place within the plot of a novel. At such a stage, the mind rushes to employ recollection which is, according to Valéry, "an elemental phenomenon which aims at giving us the time for organizing the reception of stimuli which we initially lacked" (qtd. in Benjamin 161-2). This means that the reader is thrown back into the time of the text to try and find out the clues that he/she has missed. Morson terms this operation as backshadowing and defines it as a kind of foreshadowing that is noted when the scene is revisited:

The past is viewed as having contained signs pointing to what happened later, to events known to the backshadowing observer.

Visible now, those signs could have been seen then. In effect, the present, as the future of the past, was already immanent in the past.

(234)

The function of situational irony goes beyond backshadowing in that it has the ability to refer to future events outside the scope of narrative, which forces the reader to distinguish between the time of the narrator and that of the character. An example of that will be provided and explained in our discussion of *The Book*.

Irony is thus an *aggressive displacement of a temporal ground*. In a novel, this temporal ground would be laid by the narrator, who knows beforehand the moment of ironic revelation, but

chooses to delay such information to produce a shock effect that will capture the reader's attention, in the case of an authorial narrator⁵, or is facing the ironic revelation within the narrative-present, in the case of a first-person or figural narrator. The narrative situation leads to different levels of focus which result in different degrees of intensity of displacement. Whereas the first-person and figural situations focus sympathy on a specific character, the authorial situation is detached and therefore focuses in a disinterested manner that would engage the reader less strongly than would the other two kinds of narrator.

This means that in our profiling of the ironic moments in Kundera's novels, *time directionality*, *time span*, and *narrative situation* can help us understand the significance that the grid of these moments plays in the interpretation of the narrative as a whole. If *ironic moments* keep governing the way through which a reader absorbs a text into his *temporal experience*, then providing a reading without special attention to these moments would result in an unreliable interpretation. Considering these moments as part of the temporal experience of the reader neglects the function they play in organizing the time of the narrative itself, and this would be to consider only *time-narrative* and to neglect *time-experience*. We hope to avoid these errors in our project.

However, it is important to note that other critics would have problems with such a way of understanding irony. Paul de Man clearly states that "it is very difficult, impossible indeed, to get to a conceptualization by means of definition" (165). Wayne Booth deals with what he terms a "stable irony", and one of the characteristics of such irony is that it is covert, i.e., "intended to be

⁵ The three constitutive narrative situations of Stanzel's typology are: *First-person* narrative situation, where mediacy belongs to the fictional realm of characters, *Authorial* narrative situation, where there is a difference between the world the narrator occupies and that of the characters, and *Figural* narrative situation, where a reflector replaces the narrator. A reflector is a character in the novel who "thinks, feels, and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator" (qtd. in Swanson 16).

reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface” (6). Thus, he focuses on irony more as a trope and less as a dynamic temporal force in the text, yielding what we refer to as situational irony. Northrop Frye comes closest to our definition of irony when he defines it as “a pattern of words that *turns* away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (qtd. in de Man 164). Nevertheless, he is still focused on the linguistic aspect of the ironic moment and not on the temporal capabilities. While I agree with the premise that it is difficult to give a specific definition of irony, the dynamic by which irony works, however, i.e., the operation itself, is different from the function through which de Man and others have been trying to define irony.

The confusion intensifies when the lack of distinction between rhetorical and situational ironies starts to infiltrate attempts to define irony. De Man believes that the ideal way to stop irony from infinite regress is understanding (166), and that is true for rhetorical irony, which plays on the linguistic level of communication and thus engages the reader on the level of *temporal experience*. However, situational irony, which occurs through the passing of time, engages the reader on the level of *time-experience* and not on that of *temporal experience*. Hence, one can argue that it would be even more stable than the type of irony Booth or de Man discuss. Rhetorical irony as explored by de Man is ultimately evasive since it requires the reader to pay attention to two levels of communication, linguistic and plot, and at the same time, if it flows normally within the level of the plot, this type of irony starts to regress on the level of language, which causes the friction from which a reader is able to distinguish it as irony. This means that *the moment of ironic revelation* is packed within the same linguistic level it attempts to manipulate, and that is what makes it hard to spot. On the other hand, situational irony only plays on one level of communication, and that is the plot. The *point of focus* falls not in the *temporal experience* of the reader, but within the *time-narrative* (so long it is not detected) or the *time-experience* (when

detected). Thus, the *point of focus* is *a thing in time* since it opens up a field for interpretation, not within the *temporal experience* of the reader, but within the time of the text itself.

The distinction between rhetorical and situational ironies can be traced back historically to the distinction between Romantic and Greek ironies, respectively. The first leads Millan-Zaibert to define irony as “a literary tool that lifts the rigid confines of language” (168), whereas de Man refers to irony in the Greek sense when he introduces the “traditional opposition between *eiron* and *alazon*, as they appear in Greek or Hellenic comedy, the smart guy and the dumb guy” (165) while, at the same time, engaging in an argument about romantic irony. This lack of distinction confuses the reader since one of the most exclusive characteristics of romantic irony is thus transferred to situational irony, namely, as Schlegel puts it, that it “can multiply in an endless succession of mirrors” (qtd. in Millan-Zaibert 167), which is the reason de Man warns against “an infinite regress of negations” (166) after giving an example of situational Greek irony. This confusion can be illuminated when we read Millan-Zaibert’s definition of irony within the original context that Schlegel talks about, which is Romantic poetry.

Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free.

(Schlegel 175)

What Schlegel refers to as “Other kinds of poetry” can be inferred to be Greek poetry, which is written in the epic form and thus is similar to the plot of a novel. It acquires the same characteristic

Lessing uses to distinguish epic poetry from other forms of art, namely, “that succession in time is the rule of the poet” (109) and which Stanzel describes as the rule for determining a “temporal art” (115).

Thus, once we are able to distinguish between Romantic irony, as a special mode of rhetorical irony, and Greek irony, as situational irony, we can declare that the second type does not necessarily have to suffer the fate of romantic irony, namely, “infinite regress of negations.” Kundera has declared a distinction between his project and poetry:

I did not desert poetry. I betrayed it. For me lyric poetry is not only a literary genre, but a whole way of life, an attitude towards the world. I put away that attitude as one puts away religious faith . . . An antipoetic posture grows out of the conviction that between what we think about ourselves and what we actually are there exists an infinite distance . . . To apprehend this distance, this abyss, means to destroy the poetic illusion. This is also the essence of the art of irony. And irony is the perspective of the novel. (qtd. in Woods 92)

Our study should not trip over and fall into treating the text as a document devoid of what makes it a novel, and it does not indulge in thematic interpretations with no regard to the mechanisms that are in play. It suggests a path between the two methods which preserves the formality of the text along with the lively discussion of thematic interpretations. With this admittedly ambitious project, we begin our investigation.

Chapter II. Irony in Rondo Form: *Laughter and Forgetting*

The irony in *The Book* occurs on three levels: situation, motif and theme. Each of these levels has its own function and contributes to the reading of the next level. On the first situational level, the play of irony takes the shape of 2, 3, and 4 movements. On the second level of motifs, the interplay takes the shape of a dialectical temporal juxtaposition between the chapters. And on the third level, the themes of the novel begin to echo the underlying ironies that contributed to their emergence. Each level has its own significance, but all are directed specifically to bisect the unification of the reader's *time-narrative-experience* into *time-narrative* and *time experience*.

The novel begins with a situational irony in two-movements. The image of Clementis setting his fur hat over Gottwald's head is contrasted, in the same page, by learning about Clementis' charge with treason. Both these images are told in an authorial narrative situation, setting the mood for the rest of the novel, which witnesses heavy intervention from Kundera's side, both in authorial and first-person narrative situations. In this regard, he follows Salman Rushdi's example in being aware that "the contract between the novelist and the reader must be established from the outset" (*Testaments* 4).

This form of irony in two movements occurs in multiple places in the texts. For instance, in Chapter 1, subchapter 11 (1/11), Kundera uses the figural narrative situation to tell us, from Mirek's perspective, how he thinks Zdena is setting a trap for him. Then at the start of 1/12, he juxtaposes that information by addressing the reader, in an authorial situation, that "Mirek is mistaken! No one has assigned her to deal with him" (12). In the same chapter, we learn first that "he always thought Zdena was so frenetically faithful to the party because she was a fanatic"; and yet afterwards, Kundera, upon reverting to the authorial stance, informs us: "[T]hat was not true. She remained faithful to the party because she loved Mirek" (22). In another instance, which occurs

in 2/1, the reader, through Marketa's figural situation of confusion, receives the news that mama will not be leaving on Sunday as agreed and instead will stay an extra day. Not until 2/4, when Kundera returns his attention to mama, do we learn that "she simply decided she had been mistaken about the day of departure" (44).

All these quick ironies in two movements are meant to inform the reader that things are not what they appear to be. Kundera is capable of telling the reader everything, but he is still the only one who can guide him through the novel. The duration of the irony, from the same page to three subchapters later, aims to have the reader focus on temporal displacement. This confusion caused by the alternation between authorial and figural narrative situations throughout the novel. It is meant to throw the reader off into engaging with the novel on a level that is beyond the classical mind set. It is meant to break with the traditional way of narrative progress and to embrace a situation in which "the author [is] no longer content with a mere 'story' but [has] opened windows onto the world that stretched all around" (*Curtain* 153).

The narrative starts to become more complicated when Kundera introduces irony in three and four movements, moving from the contract level to setting the mood for the story of a chapter. We are told, in 1/2, that Mirek always says "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" as part of his political message (4). Then in 1/7, we see his hypocrisy in wanting to erase Zdena from his past to control his future since "he was in love with his destiny" and "is ready to do anything for [it]" (14). Afterwards, the moment of ironic revelation arrives in 1/10 when we are told by the narrator that "the names of those who rose up against their own youth are carefully erased from the country's memory, like mistakes in a schoolchild's homework" (19) and that "as he climbs the steps to Zdena's door, he is really only a white stain" (20). The futility of Mirek's actions, which are aimed towards having a certain future-narrative, is tragic. But since

it is introduced to the reader before the eruption of the imminent power struggle between him and Zdena, the situation is turned ironic due to its futility.

Then in 2/3, the reader is told that “Marketa had met [Eva] first. That was about six years before” (42). Then in 2/5, we are told Karel knew Eva “nearly as quickly as his wife had some years later”, indicating that he was the one to know her first (46-7). In 2/6, Kundera uses the authorial situation of character introspection to convey to us, from Marketa’s perspective, how she feels about his infidelity since “she introduced him to her best friend. She gave her to him as a gift. Solely for him and for his pleasure” (51). However, the moment of ironic revelation arrives later on in 2/8 when we learn that Karel was the one who “contrived Marketa and Eva's meeting at the sauna” (56). In this example, and after having experienced irony in three movements, the reader enters a spiral of interpretative positions. He is forced to reinterpret the previously narrated situations with every piece of information revealed to him, creating his own time-experience counter to that of time-narrative. And while the three-movement irony of Mirek is designed to depressurize his entanglement with Zdena by setting the reader’s gaze towards the *future*, this four-movement irony directs the reader’s gaze towards the *past*, and points towards the moment when Karel’s sexual desire is triggered by the memory of Nora.

Having established at the outset of this chapter that irony is divided into three categories, corresponding to each of the narrative levels, we now direct our attention to how irony is capable of emerging from the situational level to affect the level of motifs. We may consider another example of irony in four movements in 5/1 where “the doctor had told [Kristyna] after her child was born that she could risk her health if not her life by having another” (165). Then in 5/2, after

explaining litost⁶, the student is revealed to be “litost incarnate” (168). The reader has to carry both these notions to chapters 5/13 and 5/14 when first the student thinks Kristyna does not want to have sex with him because she “loved him to the point of being afraid to make love with him because if she were to make love with him, she would never be able to live without him and she would die of grief and desire” (202), and afterwards when she reveals to him the true reason (204), which we learned about in 5/1. All these movements up until the moment of ironic revelation point towards the future, contrary to the example of Karel’s irony in four-movements, and further utilizes Kundera’s labeling of this situation as “litost block” (207) to completely suspend the reader’s horizon of expectations. What follows this moment could be anything since the situation is thrown into uncharted territory.

But alongside and around this irony in four-movements, a number of motifs connect to others which echo throughout the novel. The discussion of what Litost is, followed with a concrete and direct example from the student’s life, relates to Hugo realizing that “[Tamina] has never loved him. She is with him only because she needs him to go to Prague” (157), and he punishes her by refusing to fetch her parcel. This is related to the student’s expected moment of litost when he learns about the true reason she did not want to have sex with him, at which point his blocked litost acquires an ironic sting once it is compared to the executed litost performed by Hugo. This idea of failure to fulfill a sexual desire relates to Hugo’s rape of Tamina, which in turn relates to Kundera’s desire to rape his friend, R. These three situations are entangled in a web of interpretations. For while the student’s desire to force himself on Kristyna is prompted by his confidence that she wants to maintain the intellectual bond that connects both of them, Hugo’s desire is driven by the

⁶ “*Litost* is a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery.” (*The Book* 167)

quest to “find somewhere in her depths the mysterious sensitivity that was hiding itself from him” (152), and Kundera’s desire to rape R is prompted by his desire to “contain her entirely, with her shit and her ineffable soul” in an effort to reach her essence (105). The student’s failure to execute what he set out to do, on account of completely selfish reasons and can be tied to his lack of sexual activity, is shadowed by a success in execution and a failure to reach the desired thing, in the case of Hugo, and a failure in execution and a success in understanding the source of the desire as “a desperate effort to grab at something in the midst of falling” (106), in the case of Kundera.

Furthermore, this intellectual bond, which for Kristyna is one of the reasons not to have sex with the student⁷, refers back to Zdena’s critique of Mirek’s sexual activity, which is described as making love “like an intellectual” (6). The same bond also carries us forward to the time when Jan and Edwige’s sex, under the intellectual umbrella, is described as mutually functional and satisfying since it is devoid of feelings of love and romance. In his quest to ponder a motif from all possible angles, Kundera makes the motif seem ironically groundless since it can move in all directions and be loaded with whatever the situation needs to keep the misunderstanding going.

Moreover, the motif of misunderstanding, which contrasts 5/13 and 5/14, relates to Petrarch’s affirmation that “love is poetry, poetry is love”, an adage that makes the student believe that “the night awaiting him would be blessed by two poets” (199). This metaphor is abruptly abandoned when “the drab light of morning had broken the seal of silence, as if a day of prose had followed a night of poetry” (204). Kristyna then explains to the student why she did not want to have sex with him. The misunderstandings which prevail in these cases have persisted throughout

⁷ “For Kristyna vaguely imagined that by giving her body to the student she would lower their affair to the butcher's or the mechanic's level and she would never again hear a word about Schopenhauer.” (164)

the novel and result when two people have perspectives that they are unable to share.⁸ By using these juxtapositions, Kundera highlights the failure of poetry and the success of prose in the act of communication.

Other motifs exist as well in the novel, giving the reader the ability to keep up with how the novel is structured. The reference to Hugo in chapter 4 as “boy” (159) and to the two girls in chapter 3 as “women” (104) connects to the children making adult moves on the island and are connected to the idea of Angels who go through the world over solid ground. The repetition of the quote, “seeing, hearing, touching, [etc.]” (80, 257), offers an ironic contrast between a true path to a good life and a way of life that involves forgetting. Lermontov’s humiliation when Voltaire “started to dissect each of his metaphors to show brilliantly that Lermontov’s inferiority complex was the direct source of his imagination” is contrasted to the exploration of graphomania in 4/9, which leads to reading Lermontov’s anger as insincere since he is either upset about the discovery of the route of his anger, or he is ignorant of it. Lermontov’s use of italic words, which are always further explained by Kundera to give the reader context and meaning, reflects the inferiority of poetry to prose in the department of communication and is connected to the day of prose following a night of poetry in the student’s situation. Banaka’s remarks on the status of the writer, presented in our introduction, should be read in relation to Kundera’s remarks on graphomania in order to understand their ironic context.

But perhaps the greatest irony of all is the one on the level of themes. So far, Kundera’s use of irony has been doubly marked by the ignorance of the character and the knowledge of the reader. It maintains the friction separating the time of the reader from the time of the character.

⁸ A lack of communication characterizes Merik’s thinking that Zdena is a fanatic while she loved him, the fight between Karel and Marketa over the phone call, and, finally, the misunderstanding between Jan and Edwige.

But when that contract is nullified, and when that barrier of knowledge, which maintains that distance, is breached, the character gains unprecedented proximity to the reader, which makes any temporal displacement carry a significance other than irony.

Tamina is described by Kundera as the novel's "principle character and principle audience" (227). And while using the first half of this declaration to point out the significance of Tamina's function, most of the literature that deals with the novel seems to lack a proper discussion about the significance of the second half. When Tamina knows and anticipates every ironic moment, this advantage puts her in the same time of the reader and means that referring to her as "his audience" was no arbitrary thing. Tamina gains the same level of knowledge as the reader by anticipating key moments of temporal displacement. This is evident from Kundera's remark that she did not defend herself against Hugo's attack because she had been imagining this moment for three years and "now it had arrived, just as she had imagined it. That is why she did not defend herself. She accepted it as one accepts the inescapable" (151). When Kundera explains that the reason Tamina dived into the water after she saw the children rushing towards her was "not because she was afraid. She had been thinking about it for a long time" (259), he is again affirming that her actions are not out of ignorance that delivers her to ironic misfortune, but due to a tactical planning that leads her to a tragic outcome.

Moreover, while the turning points of other stories are marked by the introduction of some prompt (for example: Mirek by the memory of the letters, Karel by the memory of Nora, the two female students by the myth of the Angels, and the student by the blessing of two poets), the turning point of Tamina's story is marked by the absence of her husband's image after Hugo raped her. While the effect of *introducing* certain prompts casts doubt on the credibility of characters and their actions, thus producing ironic moments, the *absence* of Tamina's memory of her husband

gives the ensuing events an eerie feeling. This feeling, explored by Mark Fisher in his book, *The Weird and the Eerie*, “is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something” (61). And given that all of Tamina’s narrated actions in the first half of her story (Chapter 4) are driven by her desire to maintain her husband’s image, the absence of this image where it should persist does not produce an ironic effect but rather a tragic one: that of loss.

This juxtaposition between the tragic mood that governs the story, which Kundera described as “a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina goes offstage, it is a novel for Tamina” (227), and the stark irony that persists throughout the novel, means only one thing—that *the tragedy that is Tamina’s life can only be seen as ironic through the connection between the motifs running both through her story and those stories which flank hers*. It means that while Cervantes’ Don Quixote is shown as an ironic tragic hero through the absurdities that denote his heroic actions, Tamina can only be viewed as such by uncovering how the same motifs that drive her life to be tragic are used in other stories as tools of irony. To further illustrate this finding, we will attempt to read the story through a comparison with Beethoven’s *Für Elise*.

William Caplin explains in his book, *Classical Form: Theory of Formal Functions for the Instrumental Music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, that the five-part rondo is divided into 5 sections, A-B-A-C-A, where “an opening refrain returns twice, alternating with two couplets of contrasting musical content and organization”. Caplin further explains that “the refrain appears at all times in the home key, and the two intervening couplets are set in different tonal regions” (231). While “the first refrain [A] functions as the main theme of the rondo”, the first three chapters in

the novel alternate between 2, 3, and 4 as ironic movements⁹, whereas B represents couplet 1, which is the subordinate theme in the case of the musical composition and the odd theme in the case of the narrative. This odd theme is the moment in the narrative when Tamina is on a quest to maintain her husband's image and retrace her history without the ironic movement that characterized the first refrain. The A returns again as the student revokes the ironic play that was suspended by the introduction of chapter 4, or B part. Caplin explains that "refrain 2 can elicit quite different formal interpretations, depending on the structure of the first couplet" (233), which is exactly the case as we have seen in examining irony in the story of the student and how it links different motifs across the borders of chapters. The C section is then introduced when the hero's failure is seen as tragic but still sounds ironic, especially in the rapid tonal digression that marks both the end of C and the third and final return of A. This second return comes with more thematic emphasis on the failure of the hero as it uses the last strokes of the C section, enabling the listener to reexperience the initial play of irony.

This interpretation of the novel through the composition by Beethoven also sheds light on the reason for the substitution of ironic play in the last chapter with humor, satire, and sarcasm. Although Kundera declares that "satire is a thesis art; sure of its own truth, it ridicules what it determines to combat. The novelist's relation to his characters is never satirical; it is ironic" (*Testaments* 202), his use of the three literary devices in this instance is marked by a strong relation to the rest of the novel in a rather ironic stance.

There is sarcasm in Kundera's description of Hanna as someone with "a smile of a woman who knows that on her, even a red nose is charming. She lived in exemplary harmony with herself"

⁹ *Für Elise* features the quick interplay between E and Eb in the beginning and then moves on to coordinate the movements, A, E, A, and C, E, A, B, to create the main theme of the primary refrain.

(270). Moreover, satire can be found in his account of the Clevises, who are “forward-looking and . . . held progressive ideas”, as explained further:

There are many kinds of progressive ideas, and the Clevises always supported the best possible progressive ideas. The best progressive ideas are those that include a strong enough dose of provocation to make its supporters feel proud of being original, but at the same time attract so many adherents that the risk of being an isolated exception is immediately averted by the noisy approval of a triumphant crowd. (273)

Like the humor that emerges in the account of Passer’s funeral, all of these “progressive ideas” are connected to other moments in the text. The first is antithetical to Tamina’s state of anxiety and her complete dependence on the image of her husband as the motivation of her actions, the second is connected to the two students trying to please their teacher by reproducing what the teacher has said about the rhinoceros being used to create a “comic effect” (78), and the third uses the hat to link the irony of Clementis, overshadowed by serious tragedy, to humor, which overshadows the tragic loss of Passer, in the funeral scene. The high tone of humor that emerges in the novel’s projection of closure also relates to the motif of miscommunication that has persisted throughout the novel between all couples.

Thus, we can conclude that there are three approaches to reading Kundera’s novel. In the *Archimedean* approach the reader reads each story as a separate and autonomous entity. In the *vertical* approach, the reader discovers irony on the two levels of situation and motif but fails to explore the contrast with the themes that run through the novel. If the reader fails to see the motif in the context of where it was previously introduced, he/she misses the moment of ironic revelation,

presented in the repetition of the same motif in different settings, and thus reads the novel as if it were a collection of short stories. Finally, in the *horizontal* approach, the reader interprets the novel as a musical composition where the three levels are accessible to him. This horizontal way of reading the text directly corresponds with his quest to “rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique, of novelistic verbalism; to make it dense” (*The Art of the Novel* 73). The quest that relates to our explanation of density has been discussed in the introductory chapter. The horizontal approach also challenges the Husserlian conception of “internal time consciousness” as a series of progressive alterations of past experience. According to the Husserlian conception, our experience of time is constituted through “a continuity of retentional modifications” that both inform our sense of the past and transform the past into a foreshadowing that alters the meaning of the present:

This does not lead to a simple infinite regress, since each retention is in itself continuous modification that carries within, so to speak, the heritage of the past in the form of a series of adumbrations. But it is not the case here that in the horizontal direction of the flow each earlier retention is simply replaced by a new one, even if continuously. Rather, each later retention is not only continual modification that has arisen from primal impression; *each is also continual modification of all earlier continuous modifications of that same initial point.* [italics mine] (31)

While Husserl’s theory provides a way of understanding situational irony and casts light on both the Archimedean and vertical approaches, it does not help us understand a horizontal reading of the novel that allows (relatively) autonomous meanings to emerge and juxtaposes them as contrasting “textual” elements.

Giving that the first two positions have been the dominant in the literature dealing with Kundera's work, we should not be surprised to find readings of his irony as a dialectic leading to nihilism. In one part of his analysis of *The Book*, Hattingh explains how "Kundera tells us that the wisdom of the novel does not lie in proposing answers, but rather in juxtaposing questions". However, he also asserts that the strength of Kundera's political analysis lies not only in condemning totalitarian politics, "but also totalitarian metaphysics, wherever it rears its head. Kundera constantly evokes the laughter of angels, but when he joins in the laughter, he is no doubt laughing the laughter of the devil" (108). Hattingh comes to this conclusion because he takes up the point of an Archimedean reader who adopts the vantage point of the myth of laughter as expounded in Chapter 3, attempting to understand the entire work through it. Such a position has led him to translate Mirek's saying, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (4)—into an opinion of Kundera's: "The struggle for control over the future, says Kundera, is merely a struggle for attaining power over the past" (107). This reading pays no attention to Kundera's comment in *The Art of The Novel*, originally published in 1986, where the author claims that "a character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self" (34), that is to say, a creation that he uses to understand and explore a possibility, not to voice an opinion. Hattingh concludes: "All the possibilities we are offered end up being ironized and so destroyed" (109), neglecting the connections of the last chapter to the rest of the novel and treating it only as a commentary on the bisection of laughter.

In his very different treatment of Kundera's irony, Lauen declares that "for readers not aware of the friction between Kundera's past as a communist poet, and his unbearable present as an expatriate, *BL&F* may seem like a novel lacking in moral and emotional punch" (11). This conclusion is driven by his assertion earlier that *The Book* "does not allow us to escape the

pathos of the character's lonely lives because the unifying element of the story is thematically, as opposed to narratively, based" (10), a notion that this study has tried to prove wrong. Despite these misconceptions, he maintains that "the relationship between Kundera's tone and the irony implicit in a given situation is contingent on a dialectic between reader and author; the constantly shifting tone of Kundera's work is in place because Kundera sees the reader's involvement as a vital part of fiction's power" (1-2). His analysis is heavily centered on the idea that "the roots of Kundera's ironic perspective are in his experiences as a Czech intellectual during which time he was steeped in the dramatic ironies of the Central European novel (Musil, Kafka, Gombrowicz) and, more importantly, the tragedies of the day-to-day erosions of colonial communism" (8); thus, he marginalizes the crucial importance of irony as a dislocating experience and ends up "reading his work only on a political level" (11).

Another instance, this time in the order of a category error, is suggested by Mark Weeks in his study, "A Modern History of Humor Amid the Comedy of History," where the critic describes *The Book* as "a philosophical novel", neglecting Kundera's critique of Sartre's *Nausea* as "existential philosophy in a novel's clothing (as if a professor had decided to entertain his drowsy students by teaching the lesson in the form of a novel)" (*Testaments* 251). Furthermore, in falsely categorizing Kundera's work, Weeks completely misses that the author defends himself in this manner: "Although I favor a strong presence of thought in the novel, this is not to say that I like the so-called philosophical novel, that subjugation of the novel to a philosophy, that 'tale-making' out of moral or political ideas" (*Testaments* 174). Weeks's position produces unusual results:

Where *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* goes beyond *The Joke* is in dissecting the 'willed' misinterpretation of laughter that allows it to be neutralized, and even turned against itself, through

appropriation by narratives of historical purpose. Laughter is used, recalling Schopenhauer, to forget the horrors of Soviet domination, but it is also projected as a joyful herald of the future.

(Weeks 139)

To see laughter in this way clearly neglects the narratological role it possesses in casting light on Tamina's tragic situation in favor of a sanguine political reading.

A close reading of the novel reveals that Kundera himself had in mind the tendency of many critics to replace a certain 'ontological' concern with a philosophical idea, a political point of view, or cultural criticism. In 6/17, Kundera responds to an imaginary critic when he attempts to reveal a novelistic tradition that employs an extended allegory using music to make a point regarding the history of the novel. And during that extended allegory, which he then picks up and talks about extensively in *Testaments Betrayed*, he maintains that "even the most complex music is still speaking the same language" (245), affirming the possibility of reading his novel and of understanding his project despite the difficulty enveloping it.

Chapter III. The Geometry of Being: *Unbearable Lightness*

The irony in *Unbearable Lightness* follows the same pattern that emerges in *The Book*, playing over the three levels of situation, motif and theme. On the first situational level, the play of irony only takes the shape of *short-span ironies in two movements*. On the second level of motifs, the interplay takes the shape of *long-span ironies*, also in *two movements*. And on the third level, the theme of the novel emerges through the relationship between the situational and motif ironies. However, in contrast to *The Book*, where characters do not overlap between chapters, our focus in *Unbearable Lightness* will be on characters as the anchor points of our analysis, since they are spread throughout the novel.

The novel is packed with a number of situational ironies where the protagonists shift their stances regarding the situations they are going through while they are in play. For example, in 1/3, Tomas's position shifts from "[h]e would lie down beside her and want to die with her" to "[t]he feeling of wanting to die beside her was clearly exaggerated: he had seen her only once before in his life!" That is in order to present the question, "Was it better to be with Tereza or to remain alone?" (7) as a way of communicating how lightweight decisions usually are. In 1/4, Tomas "claimed the suitcase [. . .] and took it and [Tereza] home" only to declare how "[h]e himself was surprised. He had acted against his principles" (9). In 1/15, we learn that "[o]n Saturday and Sunday, he felt the sweet lightness of being rise up to him out of the depths of the future. On Monday, he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known" (30). Followed by this, we get a report of how his attitude towards Tereza had turned from *Es muss sein* to "Did it really have to be?" (32).

Tereza's main problem is her inability to reconcile her soul with her body. She thinks that "she saw her soul shining through the features of her face" and has been upset to realize "her

mother's features in her face" (38). However, the narrator is quick to inform us, one subchapter later, that "her entire life was merely a continuation of her mother's" (39). As for Sabina, we learn about the light weight of her judgment when the narrator informs us how she "knew she was being unfair" after determining that "[t]he only thing [Czech minds] were able to understand was the flames" (93). Franz's ironic situation in relation to his wife is crystalized when in 3/9 we learn how "[h]e had been afraid of wounding her" (114), while, during all this time, she did not care, and he had missed out on relating to other women.

Through the examples we have presented, we are able to determine that the novel constantly attempts to present a type of *duality* that goes into the making of each situation. This duality is the source of the ironic revelations that persist throughout the text. In reference to figure 1, the motivation would be represented by t_1 and the duality is En . This duality of the ironic situations of the protagonists signals other dualities that surround the characters: Karenin is given a male name while being a female, the crack in Sabina's painting turns out to hold other worlds, Tomas' sexual infidelity is in line with his *Es muss sein* to explore "what lies hidden inside", Tereza's quest for "something higher" is revealed in 2/25 as her flight and Kitsch implies the same concept it attempts to suppress, namely, shit.

This juxtaposition between what is on the surface and what lies underneath is articulated by Sabina when she proclaims that "[o]n the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth" (60). The idea that the text itself can articulate how it functions is pivotal to our argument, since it will be revisited again in dealing with thematic irony. However, for our current purposes, we will now focus on how the short-span ironies impact the lives of the characters.

The short-span ironies are targeting the *fundamental motivation* that drives the characters to act in this or that way. Tomas is driven by his *Es muss sein* (positive charge towards heaviness¹⁰) and his attempt to become light after Tereza leaves him, which is ironized by his heavy compassion (32). Tereza is influenced by her Vertigo (negative charge towards lightness) and her attempt at heaviness, or aspiration for “something higher” that is ironized by the declaration that it is only a form of flight. Franz is unbalanced by Extremes (positive charge towards heaviness), and the lightness he feels after leaving his wife is ironized by creating Sabina’s image to guide him. Sabina is motivated by Betrayal (negative charge towards lightness), and the “pangs of conscience” that she feels after her father’s suicide are ironized by “a chain reaction of further betrayals” (88). Each of the characters, once they attempt to negate their driving forces, is met with a force of irony that sets them back on their course.

Furthermore, each of their situations is marked by *an ability or inability to discover and maintain a specific duality* which allows them to make informed decisions. For instance, Tomas is able to differentiate between “love and lovemaking” (138), Tereza fails to make a lasting distinction between her body and her soul and continues to see them as representatives of each other, Franz fails to maintain his recognition of Kitsch, which is said to move “into the context of non-kitsch” (249), once it is recognized, and “could not accept the fact that the glory of the Grand March was equal to the comic vanity of its marchers” (261), and Sabina is successful to recognize the duality between surface and underlying substance in both her painting and in Tomas as “Don Juan in the foreground, a specious stage-set by a naive painter, and through a crack in the set-

¹⁰ The reason to regard it so is the narrator’s remarks that “The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.” (*Unbearable Lightness* 5)

Tristan” (121). Figure 2 represents the correlation between the characters’ motivations and their ability to realize the duality of their situations:

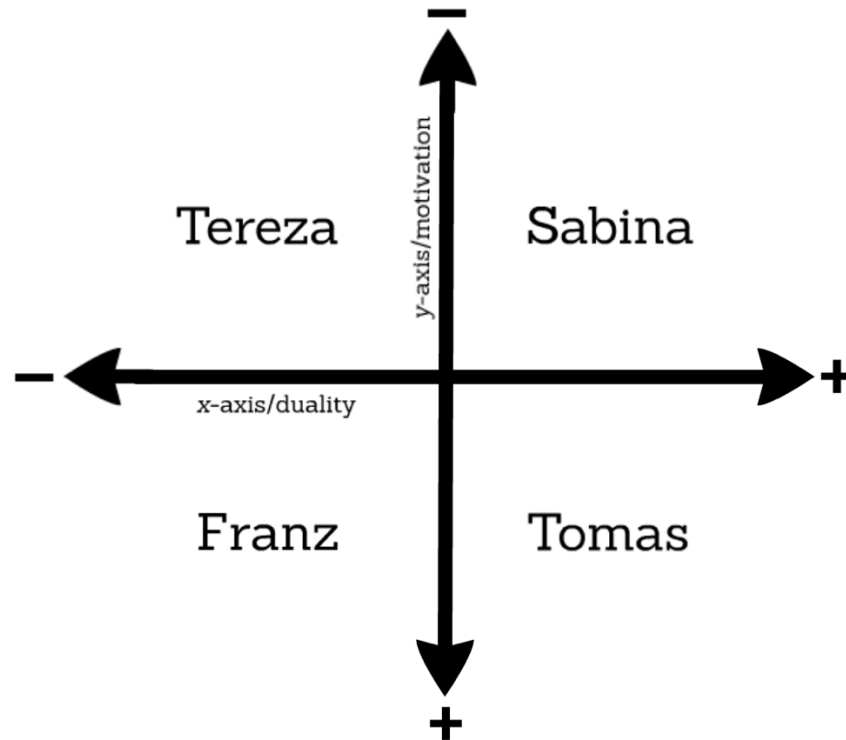


Figure 2: Visual representation of the forces governing characters’ situations

According to Figure 2, the logical outcome of each of the characters’ lives should correlate to where they reside on the graph; i.e., Tomas and Franz become the novel’s heroes, Tereza and Sabina fade into the background. Not only does this not happen, but the opposite of it is what takes place. Tomas and Franz, despite the first’s ability to recognize and maintain the duality and the failure of the second to do so, are driven by positive motivations, thrusting them forward towards what they view as the source of the metaphysical weight of the world; however, they are both conquered by the negative motivations of Tereza and Sabina. Tereza’s longing to fall leads her to wish for Tomas to be as old and as weak as she is, and Sabina’s betrayal is immortalized in the image of Sabina as a driver for Franz’s actions, which end up causing his death, and enables his

wife to hijack his life narrative. Moreover, in 6/29, the narrator asks, “What remains of Tomas?” and “What remains of Franz?”, equating their failure, while Tereza wins over Tomas in 7/7 as he renounces his *Es muss sein*, and Sabina continues to betray.

Note here how the short-span ironies are marked by both the ignorance of the characters and the readers alike, making them on equal footing with regards to the epistemological privilege. It is as if Kundera is inviting the reader to put himself in the character’s shoes. This, however, is not the case in the long-span ironies of motifs since, in order for the reader to see them in play, the irony must be marked by the reader’s knowledge and the character’s ignorance. And this very realization is what explains the nature of the long-span ironies in two-movements that mark the motifs occurring in the novel.

The major motif which is responsible for the novel’s development is that of *coincidence*. It works in direct opposition to Tomas’ *Es muss sein*, Tereza’s search for something higher, Franz’s search for the extreme, and it causes Sabina to reflect on her life when red paint falls on her painting. In their attempts to reconcile their world views with the motif of coincidence, Tomas overthinks the 6 fortuities that brought him to Tereza, who, in turn, is overthinking the 4 coincidences which led her to Tomas. Franz takes up a Sabina-image as a guide and Sabina engages in a never-ending series of betrayals. The motif of *misunderstanding*, despite being the main motif driving the short-span situational ironies in the dictionary of misunderstood words, also plays an important role among the long-span ironies. It is present in Tereza’s inability to understand how Tomas’s infidelity doesn’t spring from lack of love but from his *Es muss sein* and in Franz’s inability to see Sabina’s dislike for extremes. This is also another reason why Tereza and Franz fall on the negative side of the x-axis in figure 2. The motif of *the image* occurs in a manner highlighting the weakest-party-of-a-relationship’s reliance on a self-generated image of their counterparty to guide them

through life, only to be juxtaposed in chapter 6, which was characterized by Kundera as “an essay on Kitsch” (*The Art of the Novel* 80). Tereza understands her episode with the engineer as an act endorsed by Tomas (147), and Franz views his relationship with his young lover as a gift from Sabina (122). Kundera builds up this idea of image as a negative drive, leading people on while allowing them to identify the source of their actions elsewhere, only to counter this assumption in chapter 6 when he states that “kitsch is an integral part of the human condition” (249) and thus is not entirely negative, as it has been depicted. A common feature in the motifs we illustrated here is their tendency to fall on the side of lightness rather than weight. A person, “Guided by his sense of beauty, [...] transforms a *fortuitous occurrence* [...] into a motif” (49), the *misunderstanding* is resolved once Tomas becomes old and weak, as Tereza’s vertigo wanted him¹¹ to be, and the *image* as the source of Kitsch is normalized as a fundamental part of being human.

This means that, *while situational irony is in a state of hypertension due to the inverse correlation between light and weight, motif ironies lean towards the side of lightness*. And this very idea is the source of the irony on the level of themes which enables us to understand how the lightness of being is unbearable. According to Figure 2, we understand the suffering of the characters through their position on the axes of duality and motivation, *x* and *y*; which marks the hypertension. But given that the ironies of motifs fall outside the immediate realm of the characters, since they are not the result of the tension between motivation and duality, they do not fall on the same axes, and thus cannot be represented over *x* and *y*. The ironies of motifs instead surround the characters, marking themselves, not by their relation to the characters, but by their relation to the

¹¹ This goes so far that he proclaims towards the end of the novel, “Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission. No one has. And it’s a terrific relief to realize you’re free, free of all missions” (*Unbearable Lightness* 305).

nature of being itself. Thus, the way to represent motif ironies is by introducing z -axis through the point of intersection of x and y as we can see in Figure 3:

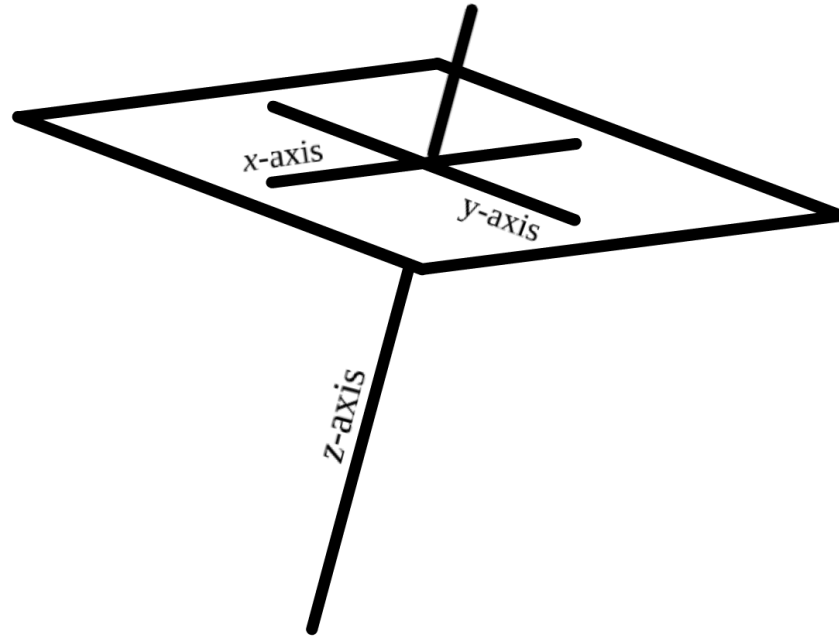


Figure 3: Visual representation of the placement of axes x , y , and z in relation to one another

What makes the lightness of being unbearable is that the characters with the positive charge thrusting towards weight believe that they are moving vertically on z -axis, while in fact they are only moving horizontally over y -axis, all while being oblivious to the fact that y -axis is not where the metaphysical weight lies but that it only floats over the z -axis of being. This very idea refers us back to the narrator's introduction in 1/1 and 1/2, especially to the question, "What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?" (5); and just as Sabina had articulated the duality, the narrator had already articulated the core idea of the novel from the outset. *This very idea, that there is a possibility of a choice between weight and lightness, is the source of the unbearable lightness of being*; and it presents what we can describe as an *open-ironic* narrative that works entirely against the prospect of the fundamental question it is trying to answer. It also contributes in portraying

both Tomas and Franz as tragic-ironic heroes, while Tereza and Sabina can be viewed as the two triumphant protagonists since their negative charge towards lightness corresponds to the general negative charge of being towards lightness. *The very idea that Es muss sein and the search for Extremes are futile attempts at reaching the weight of being, while Vertigo and Betrayal are in sync with its fundamental lightness, is the core source of both the tragedy and irony of the novel.*

From this perspective, that characters are designed as “unrealized possibilities” (215), Kundera seems to have been working towards a project of investigating the four fundamental possibilities of being. This investigation was done through pairing together the four possibilities and forcing them into “hypothetical boxes” (Lauen 25), which correlates to Cervantes’ presentation of chance encounters as normal occurrences¹² in his novel. By stepping beyond the idea of the plausible, Kundera is able to provide a near panoramic view of his ontology of being, an ontology which only the novel is able to discover¹³. To further illustrate what we mean by Kundera’s project, we will attempt a reading of the novel through a comparison with Movement One of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

As reported by Teetgen, Beethoven described the beginning of the Fifth Symphony with the words, “So knocketh Fate at the portal” (60). Grove, in *Beethoven and his Nine Symphonies*, provided us with a discussion of how the piece proceeds:

The opening subject is in the key of C minor, and is quickly answered by a second, in the key of E flat, the ‘relative major’, in which key the first section of the movement ends. That section

¹² “In the first book of *Don Quixote*, there is a tavern someplace in the middle of Spain where by pure happenstance everybody turns up” (*The Art of the Novel* 94).

¹³ “The sole *raison d’etre* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover” (*The Art of the Novel* 5).

having been repeated, we go on to the working-out, by no means long, and confined for its construction almost entirely to materials already furnished. Then comes the reprise of the opening, with the usual changes of key, a short Coda, and the movement is at an end! (144)

The beginning of the symphony correlates to subchapters 1/1 and 1/2 where Kundera knocks on the portal of being, stating his main thesis which he sets out to answer. The theme then takes these two motifs and sets out to experiment with them in climactic ascents and dramatic descents, until theme two is introduced after the horns. Theme two is a representation of the z-axis, over which the lightness of being resides, especially in the form of coincidences, since it starts with a playful interaction between the clarinets and the flutes only to be hijacked again, in a sly and cunning manner, by the violins which restore the dramatic blows used in the first theme. This correlates to how every time a character attempts to align with a charge other than its motivation, a situational ironic moment is born.

The exposition is repeated in each character's motivation being ironized, and afterwards we reach the development of the themes where "theme 1 motif is transformed from victory to foreboding", case-showing the long-span ironies in two movements. However, the piece is quick to recover a sense of climax even if it is a "dissonant" one, trying only to recapture the victorious tone of the first motif. And a battle between the lyrical light winds and the epic heavy strings takes place, where the winds are constantly undermined by the strings, despite winning each of the rounds. The battle goes on until the strings force their way over the winds by calling back the stronger first motif in a recapitulation of theme A, representing the inability of characters of the positive charge to accept the lightness of being, and their relentless attempts to reach some measure

of heaviness over the *y*-axis. The recapitulation then extends the lyrical play even more, until we reach the short coda at the end of the movement where an “anguished Theme 1 motif” (Chang, 11/17) substitutes the sure and confident blows of fate, as the characters begin to realize the inescapability of the lightness of being. The movement ends in the victorious motif, however, with a little ironic addition—Thomas declaring to Tereza that he has been happy with her despite everything—as the winds, the symbol of the lyrical, intervene to contribute to making the final recapitulation of the first motif, which has, until then, been reserved exclusively to the strings. This reading of the novel shows us that Kundera’s project of presenting the four fundamental possibilities of being needs to be appreciated as an interweaving of strands, just as it indicates why reductionist readings of the novel (as basically a study in ideology) are entirely mistaken.

Nevertheless, readings of Kundera’s novels have often been limited to the traditional method of linear understanding, even when dealing with his projects in aesthetic or phenomenological terms.¹⁴ Lauen proclaimed Tomas as “the central character in the novel”, and his logic behind this assumption is that his “fall from certainty is one of the best executed and most important narrative enactments in Kundera’s fiction” (23). We can provide two paths to criticize Lauen’s proclamation: 1) that the percentage of the narrative situation throughout the novel favors Tereza as the central character by a 3/2 ratio¹⁵, and 2) that a reading of the novel that uses Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as a metaphor for its movements shows how the complex

¹⁴ It is important to refer to Kundera’s remarks on the aesthetic and phenomenological readings of his novels. When he gives an example of the definition of a poet as “a young man whose mother leads him to display himself to a world he cannot enter”, he is quick to comment that “[the] definition is neither sociological nor aesthetic nor psychological”. And when asked if it was phenomenological, he showed some reserve, saying, “The adjective isn’t bad, but I make it a rule not to use it. I’m too fearful of the professors for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends” (*The Art of the Novel* 32).

¹⁵ The figural narrative situation from Tereza’s perspective dominates chapters 2, 4, and 7 while Tomas’s only occupies chapters 1 and 5.

construction Kundera is attempting to present cannot be reduced to a single central character through which one can read the novel. Reading the novel in the way Lauen suggests means to only listen to the first two blows of the symphony and neglect the rest of it, or to only hear the *Es muss sein* through its origin, Beethoven's "last quartet, Opus 135", and not in the full context (189).

Another attempt at reducing the novel through a linear reading is carried out by Hattingh. In his own theoretical framework, Hattingh emphasizes that his reading of Kundera's irony is informed by a "view of postmodern irony" that turns the laughter of the creating subject into "the laughter of true and uncompromising irony which shatters reader and author alike" (98). However, this view of irony carries within itself the imputation of nihilism—or perhaps annihilation—which taints any attempt to read the work as the cohesive modernist endeavor that it is.¹⁶ Hattingh's reading concludes that "[t]his novel verges on the ambiguous. We find no clear choice between lightness and heaviness at the end of the story" (112), despite the fact that through tracing the movement of irony carefully and methodically, we are able to determine that the thematic irony lies in the very assumption that either lightness or heaviness can become the dominant mode.

On another occasion, Chen and Wang have attempted an analysis of irony in the novel, which set out to investigate the novel as "a typical example of the modern ironical novels of Milan Kundera" (28). As promising as the perspective is, they were quick to proclaim that "what Kundera advocates in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is that life is without purposes, existing with no meaning" (29). This proclamation assumes, again similar to Hattingh's thesis, that Kundera is out to feed the reader a simple and direct message, instead of show-casing an investigation that is

¹⁶ "The sense of modernism is often seen in the determination of each of the arts to come as close as possible to its own particular nature, its essence. [. . .] And the novel? It, too, refuses to exist as illustration of an historical era, as description of a society, as defense of an ideology, and instead puts itself exclusively at the service of "what only the novel can say" (*Curtain* 67)

multi-sided and layered in complexity. However, as we have argued, Kundera's writing project is not primarily concerned with whether or not life has meaning, but how each character, as one possibility of being, deals with its fundamental lightness. To claim that just because coincidence is light, life has no meaning is to neglect the "sense of beauty" Kundera emphasizes in his finely crafted novels.

In his comments about how *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* came to be, Kundera, in *The Art of The Novel*, offers the following account:

I thought of the fate of Descartes' famous formulation: man as "master and proprietor of nature". Having brought off miracles in science and technology, this "master and proprietor" is suddenly realizing that he owns nothing and is master neither of nature (it is vanishing, little by little, from the planet), nor of History (it has escaped him), nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). But if God is gone and man is no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being. (41)

Through these reflections, Kundera provides us with the tools needed to read his work by means of elimination. His project is neither to investigate man's ability to control the motifs surrounding him (ironized through the long-span ironies), nor to study man's driving motivations (ironized by their opposing forces in situational irony). His project, rather, is to investigate what the absence of both elements of control means for what human being currently experience, and how human beings react towards that lack of control—or towards the inherent lightness of being—in demonstrable ways.

Chapter IV. Time as a Spiral: *Immortality*

Immortality takes on a different shape in dealing with irony than what we have seen in the past two chapters. Instead of a Kundera who is fundamentally playful and ironic, we are faced with a more serious Kundera whose irony is more dark than cheerful. Situational irony is at a minimum, and the operation of temporal displacement is not necessarily attempting an ironic effect. Motif irony continues in play as motifs are juxtaposed throughout the novel; however, thematic irony is concentrated in immortality's ability to absorb all the contradictory motifs in its march forward. This might seem that our investigation is running into a dead end; nevertheless, throughout this chapter, we hope to prove that Kundera's ironic attitude towards his novels still affects the structure of *Immortality*, even when he has toned down the ironic play compared to what can be found in his previous novels.

To elaborate on our remark regarding situational irony, let us look at an example that uses the process of temporal displacement, yet aims towards a different effect than straight forward irony. In 1/8, we are provided with an account of the gesture that sparked the narrator's imagination in 1/1. First, Agnes "suddenly, without preparation, lifted her arm in a flowing, easy motion" (39-40), then we knew how twenty-five years earlier, she witnessed how "the secretary turned, smiled, and lifted her arm in the air in an unexpected gesture, easy and flowing" (40); after that, when she was saying goodbye to her father, "she recalled the forty-year-old woman who twenty-five years earlier had stood in the same place and had waved at Father in the same way. That upset and confused her. It was as if two distant times had suddenly met in a single second and two different women in a single gesture" (41-2). This particular temporal movement, early in the novel, sets the contract that will govern the remaining time of the novel.

This example contains two fundamental aspects: a temporal displacement revelatory in 3 movements, and a circular movement which connects the first movement with the last. The first aspect means that *while all ironic movements involve temporal displacement, not all temporal displacement is ironic*. Although this movement takes on the same shape as an irony, there is no point of focus which the reader can go back to or anticipate in advance to change his understanding of this particular incident. Kundera had decided to keep using temporal displacement, but without an ironic revelation; the thing that contributes to our reading of the novel leaning towards *dark irony*, where the movement is devoid of the play it used to carry. The second aspect of the example is the circular movement it takes up. This movement correlates with the reciprocal nature of the link between the two timelines, that of Agnes and that of Goethe, to show how motifs can extend across time, indicating a fundamental aspect of the gesture's immortality.

Another instance happens in 3/7 when the argument starts with "[t]he politician is dependent on the journalist. But on whom are the journalists dependent? On those who pay them" (126). Then we are introduced to the argument of the "transformation of ideology into imagology" (127), which runs counter to the idea that the journalists are dependent on those who pay them after establishing that there is virtually no difference between "advertising and propaganda" (126). After that, we find the third movement: "After these remarks I can return to the beginning of the discussion. The politician is dependent on the journalist. On whom are the journalists dependent? On imagologues" (130).

Also, in several instances of the novel, we find direct commentary on the circular nature of events. In 1/4, Kundera tells us how "it seemed to Agnes that Mother's life was a circle" (17) and "Father, too, was returning full circle to his beginnings" (18). In 4/10 Kundera gives a hypothetical case of a lovesick Russian murderer defended by a French lawyer. The Russian murderer, "once

free will rush at his French defense lawyer to hug him and kiss him on the mouth. The Frenchman will back away in horror, the Russian will take offense, plunge a knife into his body, and the whole story will repeat itself like the song about the dog and the crust of bread” (224). In 5/3, we see how “Agnes’s story closes like a circle: from the world of roads to that of highways, and now back again” (250). In 6/2, Kundera explains that “[w]hen someone is young, he is not capable of conceiving of time as a circle, but thinks of it as a road leading forward to ever-new horizons; he does not yet sense that his life contains just a single theme; he will come to realize it only when his life begins to enact its first variations” (305-6).

This last example is our gateway to engage with motif irony. If we take up the circular movement of events within the novel as a motif, we find that in 6/15 the narrator states: “I might say that Rubens at once returned to the phase of athletic muteness, but the word ‘athletic’ isn’t quite appropriate because he had long ago lost his youthful ambition to prove his physical and sexual prowess” (344). This instance can be understood as we look at the significance and the symbolism of chapter 6. It indicates the first time that a person’s life does not come full circle, despite the fact that it had the chance to do so. It contains a criticism of the episodic nature of history attributed to Aristotle in 6/14, while itself being an episode within the narrative, given that its character “causes nothing and leaves no effects” (266-7). His life, being “the saddest erotic story [Kundera has] ever written” (267) juxtaposes the point made in 1/6 about the beauty of the episodic nature of a poem whose purpose is “to make one moment of existence unforgettable and worthy of unbearable nostalgia” (28). Moreover, the point about the episodic nature of chapter 6 is juxtaposed when we learn in 6/22 that the lute player is Agnes and therefore the chapter becomes instrumental to understanding her character.

This idea of a not-fully-closed circle of being can be understood in light of the problematic thesis Newton-Smith introduces in his book, *The Structure of Time*, that the nature of time has an equal chance of being either a straightforward or a circular line. Newton-Smith supposes “that the universe during any one period of oscillation is quite similar to the universe during any other period of oscillation” (66),¹⁷ similar to when events occur that connect Goethe’s timeline with Agnes’s; for instance, in 3/18, when we learn that “[t]his is the same gesture that Laura made in the previous chapter”, referring to Bettina performing the same “gesture of longing for immortality” (181), and in another instance, we learn in 6/22 that the lute player, whose breasts he touched, was Agnes, which correlates to 2/7, when Goethe touches Bettina’s breasts, especially when both Goethe and Rubens utter the same words: “Has anyone ever touched your breast?” (71, 328), and both Bettina and Agnes respond in the negative. He represents this supposition through figure 4:

¹⁷ In his argument, Newton-Smith considers two times that are fully concluded. This might seem contradictory to the nature of time in *Immortality* which runs uninterrupted. However, our later comments on the significance of the dial, point X on Figure 4, will show how time in *Immortality* can be treated as two distinct and fully-concluded times just as Newton-Smith’s.

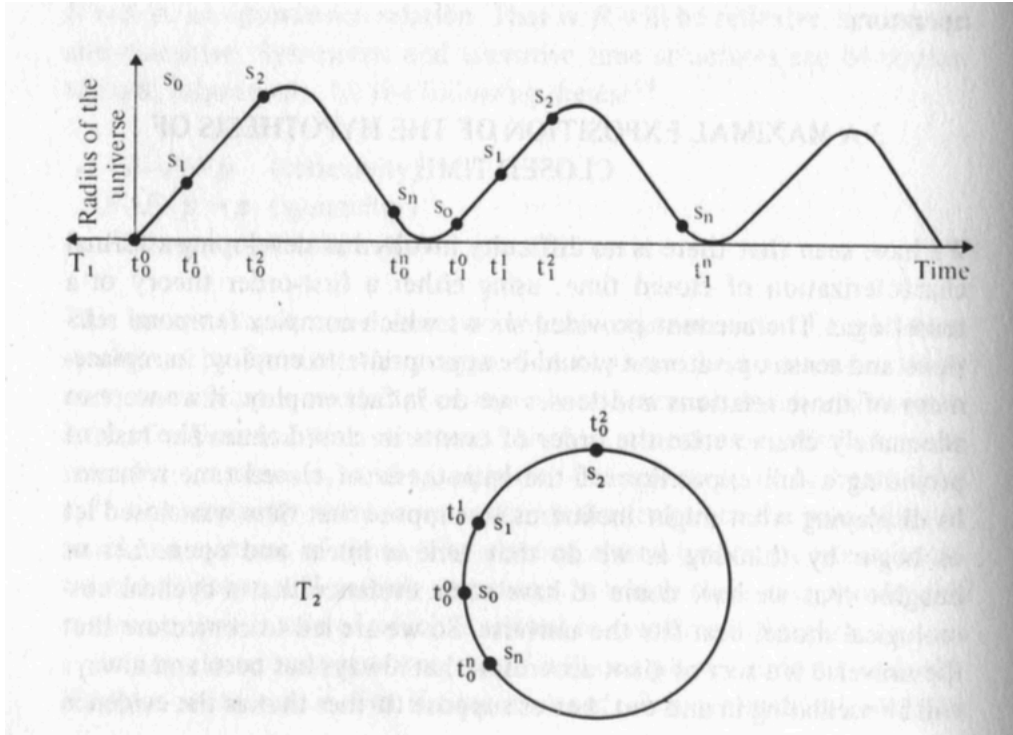


Figure 4: Time models in Newton-Smith (66)

In this figure, Newton-Smith “represent[s] the contrast between theories T_1 and T_2 ” (66).

His main thesis is as follows:

There is nothing that distinguishes the time t_1 in the future when the universe will be in a state S_0 from the time t_0 , the present time, at which the universe is in state S_0 . For whatever is true of the time t_0 is true of the time t_1 . Consequently the best conjecture to make is that the time t_0 is identical to the time t_1 : in making this conjecture one is dropping the initial assumption that time is linear and replacing it by the hypothesis that time is closed. (67)¹⁸

¹⁸ S=state, T=theory, and t= time/event

The thesis maintains that “ T_1 and T_2 are clearly incompatible theories. However, any observation that supports T_1 supports T_2 equally and vice versa” (67). This position can be consolidated if we consider the matter from Kundera’s perspective of a not-fully-closed circle, or what is known as an *Archimedean spiral*. Suppose that on a timeline T_3 , a t_0 takes place on an inner circle of the spiral while a t_1 occurs on the outer circle relative to the inner circle as we can see on Figure 5. While technically speaking, both t_0 and t_1 would fall on the same S_0 , the nature of t_0 and t_1 would be less like an identical occurrence and more like a “*theme with variations*” (305; italics in original).

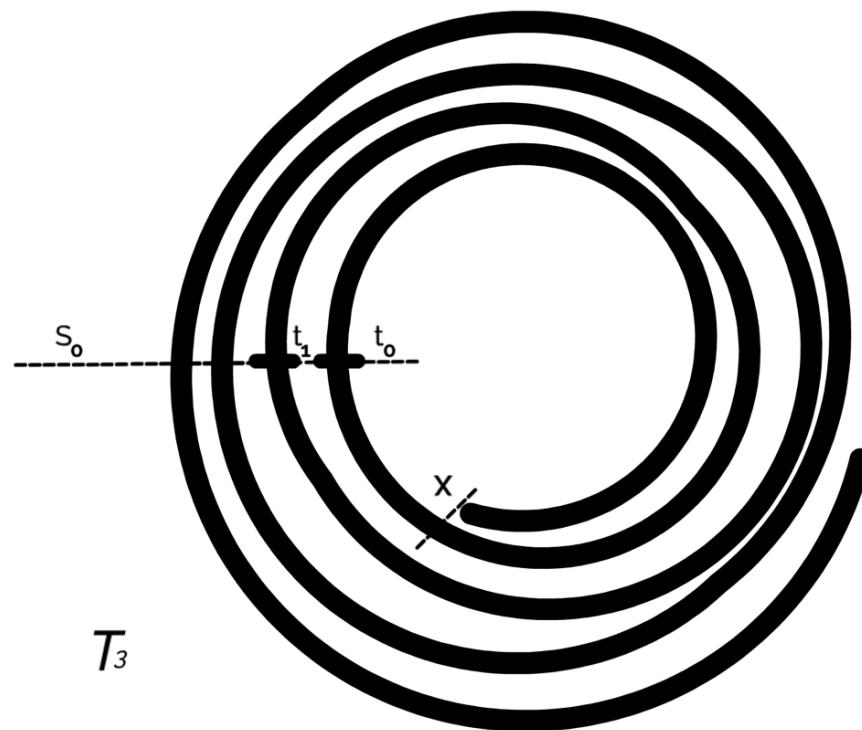


Figure 5: A representation of time in *Immortality* in which the dial continues moving after striking its point of origin

While “the gesture of longing for immortality”, S_0 , connects both t_0 , when Bettina performs it, and t_1 , when Laura performs it, the gesture itself is not identical but comes in variational form; and the same applies for Goethe and Rubens when touching the breasts of Bettina and Agnes. This

also correlates to the qualitative difference between minor and great immortality in 2/2, which places the two timelines on different ontological levels. Kundera's solution to the problem of recurrence is expressed in 6/20 when we are told that, although "[t]he hands on the dial had brought [Rubens'] sexual life full circle" and "[h]e found himself outside the dial's time", this "does not mean the end, nor does it mean death", but it rather means "that no longer will anything new or important happen" (358). In light of the qualitative distinction between minor and great immortality, such an eventuality proves that while S_0 connects both t_0 and t_1 , they stand on different ontological levels and therefore can be represented neither by T_1 nor T_2 .

This understanding of variations normalizes the idea of the juxtaposed irony of motifs. For instance, it would be normal for Goethe's poem to preserve the beauty of the moment while Rubens' episodic appearance changes nothing. For despite S_0 , the episodic nature, which connects them, they fall over two ontologically different times. And for Kundera, the point X in Figure 5, when the first circle of the spiral misses making a complete circle, which happens when the dial does not stop at full-circle, is the moment which distinguishes t_0 , being the great immortality, where the preservation of an episode would be considered poetry, from t_1 , as the minor immortality, or rather the faint echo of t_0 .

The idea of a dial that separates two times and turns a common state into a "*theme with variations*" can be understood through the First Movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony (Eroica). In his book, *A Critical Study of Beethoven's Nine Symphonies*, Berlioz described the symphony as "the hero's funeral rites", given that the original inscription read: "Heroic Symphony to celebrate the memory of a great man" (41). The symphony was dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte, who was seen as the "passionate champion of freedom, the savior of his country, the restorer of order and prosperity, the great leader to whom no difficulties were obstacles" (Grove, 51-2), and

the dedication “meant that grief which the symphony exhibits at certain points retain[s] such pure form and such nobleness of expression” (Berlioz 41).

At the beginning, the exposition exhibits all the symptoms of a triumphant mode, along with the “heroic, march-like” Part 1 of Cadence. The exposition is then repeated and is followed by a development where we experience the shift in mode. The melancholic atmosphere starts hovering over the old themes that were powerful in the exposition and continues, leading up to a fugue, which “explodes into dissonant chords crashing and burning” (Chang, 11/2). This fugue represents the dial coming full circle, but just as the dial in the novel doesn’t mean the end of the novel, the dial in the symphony is followed by Theme 4, which Chang describes as “sadly assessing the battlefield”. After this episode, the recapitulation of the exposition does not simply repeat the motifs in new variations but goes as far as to virtually invent a new thematics. Something is lost after the dial strikes, and it shows in the absence of the B section in the recapitulation of Theme 1, which correlates to the difference between the minor and great immortalities signaling the difference in the ontological grounds upon which they stand. The most drastic representation of reaching an S_0 on two different times at the Coda happens when, in Part 6, Theme 1 is repeated but by a “thickening texture” (Chang, 11/2). Normally, this would be read as a movement towards a total triumph, which uses both the winds and strings to assert itself; however, within the context of the novel, this tonal variation correlates to Kundera’s example of a news anchor trying to be amusing while announcing that “Paris has been devastated by an earthquake”. However, Kundera alerts us to the subtle nature of this variation:

[T]his has nothing to do with a sense of the comic. Because whoever is comical in such a case is someone looking for a witticism to announce an earthquake. And someone looking for a

witticism to announce an earthquake takes his activity absolutely seriously and it would never occur to him that he is being comical.

(372)

And just as a person cannot be comical while seeking to be comical in delivering a serious newscast, a tone wouldn't be serious in attempting to be serious in delivering a message of defeat.¹⁹

This distinction between minor and great immortality, signaled by the ironic juxtaposition between motifs, leads us towards understanding the thematic irony of the novel. Immortality is the single most dominant theme there is, and even if one is able to find other themes, they are subordinated to this enveloping one. However, this very theme is capable of absorbing all the contradictions of motif irony under the same umbrella. It does not distinguish between minor or great immortality since the tool it uses for its operation of preservation is the image. *Whatever can be grasped as image can be immortalized*, whether it is Bettina's image of Goethe or a burning airplane in 1/7. From this perspective, we can understand Agnes's father destroying everything which could be used to immortalize him, including pictures of himself with his wife (9). We can also understand the significance of the idea that "[a] photographer is everywhere" (32), the surrealist image of photographers taking pictures of Goethe and Napoleon in 2/4 and even the discussion about the imagologues. The ironic tragedy of the theme of immortality is that it does not matter what it preserves, no matter how contradictory it is, so long as it fits the criteria of its tool for preservation.

Other readings have also shown a tentative understanding of the forces in play in Kundera's well-crafted text. In "Continuity and Complexity in Milan Kundera's Immortality", Michael James

¹⁹ This is not to argue that Beethoven was seeking to present to us a comic aftermath following the fugue. This argument functions only within our reading of *Immortality*.

Rizza reads the novel through tracing the dominant metaphors that shape the novel. With the goal of reading the characters existentially, Rizza follows closely Kundera's remarks on this topic and does not impose a certain ideological standpoint in reading the novel. He uses the concept of metaphor to assess the play over the surface of the text and signals towards deep metaphors to show how the irony of motifs moves in a juxtaposed manner. Rizza concludes that "[b]y allowing his characters to move through different ontological states, Kundera shows that the complexity of the world exists at every level, not just in the reader's head." This reading correlates to our understanding of the text's ability to direct the reader's perception of events, and not the other way around. Rizza goes on to say:

Like postmodernism, Kundera's aesthetic preferences the many over the one, but it has the additional advantage of resisting top-down impositions of meaning while simultaneously avoiding the pitfall of collapsing all claims beneath the weight of postmodern play. (362)

Through this understanding of Kundera's project, and with an open-minded reading of postmodernism, not as a chaotic structure but as a mode of resistance, Rizza is able to give us an understanding about what Kundera means when he labels himself as an "antimodern modernist" (350).

However, contrary to Rizza's tentative reading, we find other readings that miss the point. In her book, *Kundera and Modernity*, Liisa Steinby claims that, in *Immortality*, "the main theme is not the one announced by the title but its opposite, death or mortality, which is an inescapable part of human existence" (110). However, in reversing thematic irony into rejection and nihilism and reducing the reading of the text to its antithesis, Steinby fails to address neither the text's

ontological multiplicity which Rizza had discovered, nor the understanding of time we have attempted to clarify. She goes on to state that “Kundera claims that the individual does not take his or her mortality into account” (110), which goes against almost all the stances Kundera presents whenever he takes up a figural narratological situation and gives us a glimpse of the world through the character’s eyes. She continues that “[t]his manifests itself on the one hand in a longing for immortality, on the other in the attitude of kitsch which denies or veils the fact of death” (110). But this particular position is contradictory on two levels: first, it comes right after introducing Kundera’s claim that individuals do not worry about their immortality, and second, it misses that Kitsch, as it is introduced in *Unbearable Lightness*, is “the absolute denial of shit” (*Unbearable Lightness* 242), not of death, and that it springs from “*a categorical agreement with being*”, not with non-being (*Unbearable lightness* 241; italics in original). Nevertheless, and despite her contradictory reading of *Immortality*, her classification of the three novels we have been dealing with under the category of the polyphonic is valid and insightful. We will return to it in our conclusion.

Another misreading of *Immortality* can be found in Stephen Ross’s article, “The Abdication of Culture: The Ideology of Imagology in Milan Kundera’s *Immortality*”, which claims that “[a]dhering with almost naïve simplicity to his injunctions against reading his works *only* as ideological critiques, most of Kundera’s critics have avoided ideological readings altogether” (331-2). And goes on to add in a footnote that “Fred Misurella’s and David Lodge’s readings typify the avoidance of ideology in Kundera criticism” (353). The examples he gives explain this viewpoint. In *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, Misurella gave what could only be described as a simplified version of the plots of Kundera’s novels. One cannot, by any means, say the book offers *readings* of the novels, but rather an *unpacking* of what the novels carry within

their complexity; a valuable contribution in its own domain. Moreover, the reader of Klara Lutsky's excellent review of "Kundera's Reception in the West (1970–1990)" will know, without a doubt, how immersed in ideology readings of Kundera have been. Lutsky concludes that "[a]s one can observe, the bulk of Kundera's Western criticism show a strong tendency to cast him into four main stereotypes as a writer: political, erotic, philosophical and the joker" (118).

In his postscript on *Immortality*, John O'Brien concludes with remarks that open different possibilities of reading the novel, much like ours, beyond the historical and political readings that have dominated the literature on Kundera. In defending a more nuanced approach to theme and philosophical intention, he writes:

Immortality, then, argues forcefully both against privileging contextual interpretation and for a playful irresponsibility in the relationship between the author and the authored text. It is not historical context itself that runs contrary to the kind of interpretation I think Kundera's texts invite, but interpretation that exclusively privileges the prop or backdrop at the expense of the questions that resonate beyond both history and authorship.

(127-8)

Conclusion: A System, After the Fact

“I MUST Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s”
(676)

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

In our investigation into the structure of Kundera’s novels, as it emerges in the tracing of irony, we have attempted to cast light on what we might call *a system after the fact*. We have tried to provide an account for how the text is structured, without, however, falling into the dogmatic tendencies of structuralism. The thesis writer initially hesitated to approach this topic in this manner, knowing how Kundera himself is strongly opposed to systematization. In his book, *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera voices his agreement with Nietzsche’s argument that it is crucial “to resist the temptation to turn one’s ideas into a system” (150).

However, after a discussion about the “mathematical structure” of his novel, *The Joke*, in an interview with Christian Salmon, Kundera was asked whether or not this “mathematical structure [was] premeditated”. His response was: “No. I discovered all that after *The Joke* was published in Prague, in an article by a Czech literary critic, ‘The Geometry of *The Joke*’. It was a revelation to me. In other words, that ‘mathematical system’ emerges completely naturally as a formal necessity, with no need for any calculation” (*The Art of the Novel* 86-7). And that was our cue to understanding Kundera through a system that does not attempt to impose a certain set of ideas over the text but rather listens attentively to each text’s particular rhythm and tries to capture it. In our investigation, we attempted to strike a midpoint between what Robert Scholes calls high and low structuralism.²⁰ Scholes gives Barthes and Genette as examples of who can be related to

²⁰ Scholes explains what he means by these terms in saying that “[t]he low structuralist writes to be immediately useful, to be ultimately superseded” while “the achievement of the formalists, like that of Aristotle, will be permanent because it will have to be incorporated in any later poetics of fiction” (158).

high and low respectively. His understanding of these two positions is founded upon the issue of how textuality is displaced in their respective approaches to criticism:

Barthes's interest in codes and Genette's in figures take them both away from the text in order to find the meaning of its message. But Barthes, going to the cultural codes explicitly, finds meanings that are cultural, collective, almost involuntary as far as the reader is concerned. While Genette, tracing the rhetorical activity involved in the perception of figures in a text, locates meanings that are closer to the reader's experience of the text than to the cultural codes alluded to by the text. Genette's reading stays close to the 'how' of perception; Barthes moves explicitly to a 'what' which is not so much perceived as recognized. (162)

When examined closely, we can say Barthes's project was closer to the diachronic aspect of structuralism, while Genette's was more concerned with the synchronic. Nonetheless, since both of them had to "look away from the text" for meaning, their theoretical frameworks did not suit our purposes. On the other hand, we have the example of Northrop Frye, "whose system is founded on a fusion of diachrony and synchrony" (Riccomini 34). However, "[a]lthough Frye, like the structuralists, emphasizes system, he models his system not on linguistics but on the structure of myth and fable, the archetype" (Riccomini 35). In this case, we encounter the problem of pushing the text into a historical reading based on references rather than on the particularities of the text. However, if we are to identify a structuralist whose method is closest to the one employed here, it would be Tzvetan Todorov. Due to the limited space, we will only refer to certain aspects of his work. According to Scholes, Todorov believed that "[a] mere hunt for archetypes or any

preestablished structural pattern is not an exercise in poetics but a parody of it" (143), thus debunking both an ideological or an archetypal reading of a text. Moreover, his method of "figuration", which consists of "taking a text or group of texts as a system determined by a particular figure or structure functioning at various levels" (Culler 119-120) correlates to our method of tracing irony over the three levels of situation, motif, and theme.²¹ But perhaps Todorov's greatest insight, as we read it in Scholes, is inherent in his conception of reading:

Reading approaches the literary work as a system and seeks to clarify the relationships among its various parts. Reading differs from projection in two ways: it accepts the autonomy of the work as well as the particularity, while projection accepts neither. Its relation to commentary is closer. Commentary is in fact an atomized reading. Reading is a systematized commentary. (144)

Based on this understanding of the activity of reading, we can refer the reader back to our discussion of Stephen Ross's comments in Chapter IV. Having done so, we hope to have proven that listening to Kundera's "injunctions" was not an act of "naïve simplicity".

But the primary reason why structuralism proved inadequate theoretical frameworks is because of its incessant need to interpret the text through external connections, no matter how focused the theoretical framework might be. One needs not to look beyond structuralism's failure

²¹ In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera states that he "compose[s] the novel's story; over that, [he] develop[s] the themes. The themes are worked out steadily *within* and *by* the story" (83). Then, he makes a distinction between theme and motif, saying that "[m]otif is an element of the theme or of the story that appears several times over the course of the novel, always in a different context" (84). Our investigation of situational irony was informed by an observation of the patterns of play which were found to be connected to irony in the other two levels.

to address the uniqueness of the text through attempting a 5-levels system of naturalization²² that seeks to identify the text's outer shell before understanding the text's individual uniqueness, an error that structuralism surprisingly shares with most ideological readings of literary works. However, while running the risk of being misread as a totalizing attempt at every corner, this step back from structuralism did not discourage us from finding points of contact between our project and structuralism that help identify and situate our critical approach. This project then acts as a selective surveyor of theoretical concepts. To illustrate how our readings of the three novels have synchronic and diachronic aspects, while also reaching beyond them, we turn now to Liisa Steinby's comments about the categorization of the three novels.

In her categorization of Kundera's work, Steinby lists the three novels that we have investigated under the category of the polyphonic (97). Despite the fact that her analysis of the significance of the polyphonic nature of his novels does not go beyond listing the voices that contributed to the thematic structure of the text, the classification itself tells us something more about the texts, namely, their ability to be classified in a *synchronic* manner. This means that a study that takes up the motifs that echo in the three novels would find so much to go on. The motifs of the border, the lightness of being, the circular movement, Kitsch, Litost, etc., all make up a rich network of connections that gives any critic plausible reason to apply a structuralist reading to them.

Moreover, the level of information that Kundera shares with the reader varies between the three novels. In *The Book*, the reader is always aware of the situational irony, in *Unbearable*

²² In *Structuralist Poetics*, Chapter 7, Jonathan Culler identifies 5 levels of naturalizing a text, namely, the 'real', cultural *vraisemblance*, models of genre, the conventional natural, parody and irony. Not only do these levels miss the intricacies of the text, but they replace its uniqueness in favor of an obsession with the systemics of language that dominates the structuralist project.

Lightness, the reader can see the situational irony but motif ironies are hidden from him/her, and in *Immortality*, the reader, on many occasions, is not even told who the character in the situation²³ is. If we take this observation in the context of polyphony, we can see that having multiple voices has allowed Kundera to place Tamina at the same level of knowledge as the readers for the purpose of giving her tragedy an ironic sting, and to investigate the four possibilities of being within a context where the characters, if granted an overall view like the reader, would be able to identify their lightness. Polyphony also allows the author to suggest the circular nature of the time that some characters occupy but others don't, while denying characters any possibility of figuring out their situation. This reading correlates to our comment that Kundera's irony becomes *dark* in *Immortality*. We might clarify this comment. It does not become dark out of the blue but rather turns *darker* through a period of development. A *diachronic* development that could not have been possible without the polyphonic devices that connect these three novels. This reading also corroborates Kundera's comment that "he had completed a cycle of novels and that if he were to start something new this would be a completely different thing" (Steinby 98). However, as we can see, *neither a synchronic nor a diachronic reading of the texts, taken separately, reveal the formal structure of the texts themselves*. On the basis of our method, however, the novels exhibit a structure that is sustained by the many uses of irony that we have identified in the thesis.

This, then, is what we mean by a *system after the fact*: it is an approach to the text that takes into consideration its internal particularities before attempting to introduce any external factors, and an understanding of history that does not seek to force the text into an existing pattern, but a broad perspective that allows for relations of kinship to emerge free from predetermined

²³ Kundera does not reveal that the woman in the red dress is Laura, or that the lute player is Agnes, or that Avenarius is the one who sent the complete-ass certificate until very late in the novel. An episodic reader would not grasp the significance of the revelation.

canonic correlations.²⁴ This is an approach that ultimately seeks to present *a systematic reading of the formal structure of the text without alienating the text from its own reading*. We hope to have been successful in our endeavor.

²⁴ This evokes Kundera's understanding of history since he views his work as part of the corpse of works by "Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz" whom he called "the Pleiades of Central Europe's great novelists" and believed that their work has "express[ed] a similar aesthetic orientation" (*Curtain* 50-1).

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